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**EMOTIONAL, PHYSICAL SPOUSAL ABUSE PREVALENT IN OKLAHOMA;
OCTOBER DESIGNATED DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AWARENESS MONTH**

An estimated 136,000 Oklahoma women – 17.4 percent of women over the age of 18 who are married or living in a similar situation – have reported they are emotionally and/or physically abused by their partner.

“Domestic violence is more prevalent in Oklahoma than people realize,” said Julie Young, deputy commissioner for domestic violence/sexual assault services at the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services. “Although domestic violence is not limited to women, more than 85 percent of victims are women. With October designated as ‘Domestic Violence Awareness Month,’ we hope to educate people about the huge issue of domestic violence in Oklahoma, encourage victims to seek the help they need, and work with the legislature to keep state funding for victims’ and children’s services at the forefront during the next legislative session.”

Of the 136,000 Oklahoma women who are involved in abusive domestic relationships, more than 105,000 reported emotional abuse with no physical abuse, about 24,000 suffered both emotional and physical abuse, and more than 6,750 were physically abused by a male partner, the ODMHSAS study noted.

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Although many people may consider domestic violence as physical abuse only, this isn't the case, Young said. "Often in a physically abusive relationship there is emotional abuse as well, such as name-calling or verbal put-downs, restricting contact with family or friends, inducing fear through intimidation, or overly controlling behavior.

"Emotional abuse is just as damaging as physical abuse, because the scars of emotional abuse can last a lifetime," she added. "Many victims of domestic violence have low self-confidence and low self-esteem because they are continually being torn down by their partners. Emotional trauma, depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder are all problems that can result from physical and emotional abuse.

"Domestic violence tends to be hidden in families and it is a crime we need to recognize," Young said. "It is a crime that has negative consequences ranging from the need for mental health counseling to medical surgeries for broken jawbones or facial fractures. Plus, the impact on children is tremendous. Although the partner is the primary target, violence is often directed toward children, as well. Neurologically, a child's brain function can change as a result of witnessing violence or growing up in a violent environment. Domestic violence impacts their behavior and functioning, and perpetuates the cycle of abuse in future generations."

Young said communities can and should become involved in recognizing and preventing domestic violence.

"We need to be aware of it and be able to recognize it so we can encourage people in that situation to seek help," she said. "All it takes is one person to help a victim. It's also

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important to realize that domestic violence cuts across all socioeconomic levels, from people living in poverty to wealthy couples.”

If you suspect a friend is involved in an abusive relationship, here are some basic steps to assist them:

- ✓ Approach your friend in an understanding, non-blaming way. Tell them they are not alone, that there are people like them in the same kind of situation, and that it takes strength to survive and trust someone enough to talk about battering.

- ✓ Acknowledge that it’s scary and difficult to talk about domestic violence. Tell your friend they don’t deserve to be threatened, hit or beaten. Nothing a person can do or say makes the abuser’s violence OK.

- ✓ Share information. Learn about domestic violence and discuss how abuse is based on power and control.

- ✓ Support this person as a friend. Be a good listener. Encourage your friend to express their hurt and anger. Allow them to make their own decision, even if it means not being ready to leave the abusive relationship.

- ✓ Ask if your friend has suffered physical harm. Go with them to the hospital to check for injuries. Help report the assault to police, if the victim chooses to do so.

- ✓ Provide information on help available, including social services, emergency shelters, counseling services and legal advice.

- ✓ Inform your friend about legal protection available under abuse prevention laws. Go with her or him to the county courthouse to get a protective order to prevent

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further harassment by the abuser. If you can't go, find someone who can.

✓ Plan safe strategies for leaving an abusive relationship. Never encourage someone to follow a safety plan that the person believes will put her/him at further risk.

To obtain additional information about any of these areas, including referral to shelters and counseling services, call the **ODMHSAS "Safeline" at 1-800-522-7233.**

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